

News Release
U.S. Department of Justice
United States Attorney
District of Rhode Island



November 3, 2004



Pawtucket man pleads guilty in "drugs-for-guns" trade

Benny Vasconcelos, 21, of Pawtucket, has pleaded guilty to being a felon in possession of firearms. Agents of the **Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF)** arrested Vasconcelos in August after he traded a half-ounce of crack cocaine for two handguns.

United States Attorney Robert Clark Corrente announced the guilty plea, which Vasconcelos entered yesterday before U.S. District Court Judge Mary M. Lisi in U.S. District Court, Providence. Vasconcelos is detained at the Wyatt Federal Detention Center, Central Falls, pending sentencing, which is scheduled for January 28.

At the plea hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney Luis M. Matos said that, had the case gone to trial, the government would have proven that, on August 11, Vasconcelos gave an undercover ATF agent approximately ½ ounce of crack cocaine in exchange for two handguns.

ATF began an investigation after developing information that Vasconcelos was a drug dealer interested in buying guns. After negotiating with an undercover ATF agent about a guns-for-drugs deal, Vasconcelos met with the agent on August 11 at a restaurant on George Street, Pawtucket. The undercover agent showed Vasconcelos three guns and allowed him to pick two in exchange for drugs. Vasconcelos took two of the pistols from the trunk of the agent's car and put a package containing approximately ½ ounce of crack cocaine in the trunk. A team of agents then moved in and arrested Vasconcelos.

Vasconcelos, of 289 Lonsdale Avenue, First Floor, has a prior state felony conviction for carrying a pistol without a license. The statutory maximum penalty for being a felon in possession of firearms is ten years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine. Federal sentencing is determined on the basis of guidelines that rely on such factors as the specific nature of an offense and a defendant's criminal background, if any.

Project Safe Neighborhoods

The **ATF Firearms Trafficking and Violent Crimes Task Force** investigated the case as part of **Project Safe Neighborhoods**, a Department of Justice initiative against gun crimes. Under Project Safe Neighborhoods, the U.S. Attorney's Office, working with Providence Police, ATF, the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office, and other agencies, aggressively prosecutes federal firearms offenses in an effort to incarcerate those responsible for gun violence and deter others from committing gun crimes. Since 2001, federal firearms prosecutions in Rhode Island have more than doubled and gun offenders have been sentenced to a total of more than 500 years in federal prison.

ATF agents and investigators from **Providence Police, Rhode Island State Police, Warwick Police**, and the **Rhode Island Attorney General's Office** are assigned to the ATF Task Force. **Pawtucket Police** also contributed to the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Luis M. Matos is prosecuting the case.

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